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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CACEN, EUR/PPD/PA, DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TI](#)

SUBJECT: "JUSTICE" IN TAJIKISTAN: ISKANDAROV SENTENCED TO 23 YEARS IN PRISON

1. Tajikistan's Supreme Court sentenced Mahmadrusi Iskandarov, former Chairman of the Democratic Party of Tajikistan and former head of Tojigaz, Tajikistan's state-run natural gas monopoly, to 23 years in a maximum-security prison. The court authorized the government to strip Iskandarov of his rank of Major General, confiscate his property, and take back Tajikistan's third-highest honor, the Spitamen medal, awarded to Iskandarov in 2001 when he was still in President Rahmonov's favor. The court also ordered restitution of over \$470,000 allegedly taken from Tojigaz. Iskandarov was convicted on eight counts under the Tajik Criminal Code, including terrorism, banditry, possession of illegal weapons, as well as forgery, bigamy, and embezzlement of state funds. Iskandarov will certainly appeal the verdict.

2. Iskandarov's verdict comes two days after former United Tajik Opposition field commander Yoribek "Shaykh" Ibrohimov received a similar 22-year sentence for the same August 2004 shooting in Iskandarov's hometown of Tojikobod. This city lies in the middle of Tajikistan's politically sensitive Rasht Valley, a former opposition stronghold. The Supreme Court fingered Iskandarov as the ringleader of the "terrorist attack," adding that the crime was committed with "illegally-posessed weapons."

3. (SBU) COMMENT: As recently as spring 2004, Rahmonov had attempted a reconciliation with Iskandarov and had reportedly offered him a major political position in return for his support. Iskandarov refused and made clear he would stand in opposition at the next presidential election. Many believe the government used Iskandarov's trial to intimidate any potential political challengers to President Rahmonov. Social Democratic Party Chairman, Rahmatullo Zoyirov, released a press statement calling the trial "politically motivated" and the outcome "ordered." Post concurs; Iskandarov's arrest, trial, and verdict appear politically motivated and could effectively scare off contenders for the November 2006 presidential elections. END COMMENT.

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